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ABSTRACT

Noting that the English-Only movement (which advocates that English be the official and only language used in the United States) dramatically influences the lives of language minority children, this Digest first examines the ideologies undergirding the English-Only movement. It then reviews the consequences of imposing this legislation on the language minority population. Next, the Digest presents a summary of research findings on the importance of mother tongue maintenance among language minority children. The Digest concludes by exploring the implications of the English-Only movement on equality and equity education for all children. (SR)

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English-Only Movement: Its Consequences on the Education of Language Minority Children

by Mei-Yu Lu

The education of children from disadvantaged groups has been frequently a topic of political debate. The current English-Only movement, which advocates that English be the official and only language used in the United States, dramatically influences the life of language minority children, their families, and educators working with them. In this Digest, we will first examine the ideologies undergirding the English-Only movement, then review the consequences of imposing this legislation on the language minority population. A summary of research findings on the importance of mother tongue maintenance among language minority children will then be presented, and we conclude by exploring the implications of the movement on equality and equity education for all children.

Ideology Underlying the English-Only Movement

The advisability of legislation mandating an official language policy is hardly a new issue, but one that has been debated throughout the history of this country. Crawford (1992) in his book, *Language Loyalties*, summarizes the opposing views on this topic, as follows:

> For supporters, the case is obvious: English has always been our common language, a means of resolving conflicts in a nation of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Reaffirming the preeminence of English means reaffirming a unifying force in American life. Moreover, English is an essential tool of social mobility and economic advancement. The English Language Amendment would "send a message" to immigrants, encouraging them to join in rather than remain apart, and to government, cautioning against policies which could retard English acquisition.
>
> For opponents, Official English is synonymous with English Only: a mean-spirited attempt to coerce Anglo-conformity by terminating essential services in other languages. The amendment poses a threat to civil rights, educational opportunities and free speech, even in the private sector. It is an insult to the heritage of cultural minorities, including groups whose roots in this country go deeper than English speakers Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians. Worst of all, the English-Only movement serves to justify racist and nativist biases under the cover of American patriotism (Crawford, 1992, p. 2-3).

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Impact of English Only on Academic and Social Learning

The opportunity to use their mother tongue affects the educational and cognitive development of language minority children. Like native English speakers, language minority children go to school with many well-developed skills in their first language (L1). These children are also able to use their L1 for culturally appropriate activities in various contexts with different participants and topics. These skills constitute the bridge which connects L1 with the learning of English (Ollia & Mayfield, 1992). Edelsky (1986) maintains that once a firm base has been founded in language minority childrens' native languages, they are willing to explore and find out how a new language works. These children can also apply their background knowledge in their L1 to make sense of the unfamiliar, to create their own English written text, and to read English materials written by others. Even when the written form of the L1 and English - such as the Chinese characters and the English alphabet - are distinctly different, the children are still able to apply the visual, linguistic, and cognitive strategies used in their L1 to reading and writing in English (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). These essential resources are made unavailable, however, when children are thrown into an English-Only situation where they are expected to learn unfamiliar content in an unfamiliar language. Without the bridge provided by their L1, their chances of achieving academic success may be severely reduced.

The enactment of English-Only legislation in many states not only threatens to inhibit the academic advancement of many language minority children, but also deprives these children of the many social advantages resulting from using their mother tongue. Researchers (Wong-Fillmore, 1991b; Gibson, 1998) have maintained that the consequences of losing a mother tongue for language minority children are often extensive and severe. Wong-Fillmore explains that in homes where parents do not communicate with children in the mother tongue, family communication may deteriorate. Where parents and children do not share a common language, communication is often limited to the basic necessities, preventing parents from transmitting to their children the complex set of values, beliefs, wisdom, and understanding which provide the foundation for their children's learning and development (Wong-Fillmore, 1991a).

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Wong-Fillmore also noted a quick shift in language use in home and at school among language minority children, especially the younger ones, in the United States. She argues that children lose their mother tongue at a far higher rate than they learn their second language (Wong-Fillmore, 1998); this phenomenon, she further explains, is one in which "learning a second language means losing the first one" (Wong-Fillmore, 1991b). In an immersion program, where English is the only instructional language, the children are at a greater risk of losing their mother tongue before they have fully mastered their second language. As education in the United States has traditionally been verbocentric (Leland & Harste, 1994), with language as the dominant way of learning and teaching, the limited language skills these children possess, either in their mother tongue or a second language, are unable to support their learning.

Impact of English Only on Equality in Education

Recent political debates, such as that over Proposition 227 in California, have highlighted the issue of *equality* in education. Equal education, which pertains to the provision of the same educational opportunities for all children regardless of their backgrounds, would make English the sole instructional language for every child. Proponents of an equal education agenda, however, often overlook its ramifications on language minority children. While the federal government has never imposed legislation mandating an official language, many states have adopted various forms of Official English legislation (for more information, please visit the website at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/langleg.htm#State) and have mandated that English be the only instructional language used in public schools. Ironically, this type of instruction not only makes it difficult for language minority children to receive meaningful education, but may also be detrimental to their familial and social integration. Consequently, in the 1974 case of Lau v. Nichols, the Supreme Court ruled that: "there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (U.S. Supreme Court, 414 U.S. 563). Although state-imposed standards have never been declared unconstitutional, since the aforementioned Supreme Court ruling, public school systems have had a legal responsibility to provide appropriate instructional programs - either bilingual or English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) - to meet the needs of language minority children. However, the effectiveness of such efforts remain to be seen.

The Challenge

When a school reinforces an English-Only policy, it sends a message to all children that minority languages have less value than English as tools of learning. And because the school is a microcosm of society, this message also suggests that those languages are not an integral part of the American society. This message equally deprives mainstream children of the opportunity to experience the cultural diversity in this country, and robs every child of the chance to learn the full potential of human possibilities (Heath, 1986). For these reasons, the English-Only movement should be carefully and critically reviewed in order to accord language diversity its due respect.

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